

Ad Hominem Argument: Lesson Plan

Topic	
<p>An ad hominem argument is one that is directed against the opposing person rather than the position they're maintaining. This argument is often used as a logical fallacy so that one can undermine their opposition's case without having to directly confront and dispute it. However, ad hominem arguments can be relevant to a critique when used logically instead of merely appealing to prejudices and emotions. Ad hominem arguments can be a clear direct attack against the opposer's character or more subtly cast doubt on their personal motives.</p>	
Possible subjects/classes	Time needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English • Public Speaking/Debate • Philosophy • Politics/Government 	30-45 minutes
Video link:	
https://academy4sc.org/topic/ad-hominem-argument-stick-it-to-the-man/	
Objective: <i>What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?</i>	
<p>Students will be able to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define ad hominem arguments • Explain the different types of ad hominem arguments and their purpose • Identify when an ad hominem argument is legitimate as opposed to a logical fallacy 	
Key Concepts & Vocabulary	
Logical fallacy	
Materials Needed	
Worksheet, computers or internet connected devices for second activity suggestion	
Before you watch	

Provide students with the following scenario:

You are looking over possible new budget plans for this semester. You're finally settling on one just as your employee Alex comes barreling into your office and sets a huge binder down on your desk. A total system overhaul, they state. You only have fifteen minutes before you need to present this semester's budget plan to your boss - you don't have time to look this new plan over thoroughly. However, you also know from the short time Alex has worked here that they may be a bit impulsive and whimsical, but they also can be quite stubborn. Alex isn't going to let you shoot down their proposal without a reason. If you skim through their proposal, you'll get their hopes up, and your conversation will be made more difficult. If you mention their poor sense of timing though, that will likely cause them to storm into your boss' office, which will reflect poorly on you.

What do you say to Alex?

It might take a few suggestions before the students start providing ad hominem arguments. Be sure to remind them that other solutions won't work - i.e., they cannot mention the time crunch or look over the proposal. If the students are stuck, go over the facts of the situation with them: Alex has not worked at the company as long as you, they tend to not think things through, etc.

When students begin to attack Alex personally, remind them that they don't know Alex's full situation- perhaps Alex's argument was valid, or maybe it truly wasn't. Either way, attacking the person directly won't actually invalidate the points that they are making.

While you watch

{anything students should notice while watching the video}

After you watch/discussion questions

1. Ask students why they decided to attack Alex's person rather than their argument in the introductory activity. Did it seem like a fair debate tactic? Why?
2. When might it be a good debate tactic to attack the person arguing rather than directly attack their argument?
3. How would you respond to personal attacks on your character?

Activity Ideas

1. Complete the scenarios on the worksheet alone, in pairs, or groups and discuss answers as a class.
2. Give students 10 minutes to research Ad Hominem arguments in the news,

current events, or politics. Each student should find one example and explain to a partner or the class why it's an example of an ad hominem argument. (if computers aren't available, print out or show a few recent headlines, debates, political ads, etc that use ad hominem arguments and ask students to identify which type it is and brainstorm how the argument could be made more effective).

Sources/places to learn more

1. Brinton, Alan. "A rhetorical view of the *ad hominem*." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol 63, issue 1, 1985, pp 50-63. Doi: 10.1080/00048408512341681.
2. Eemeren, Frans H. van, Bart Garssen & Bert Meuffels. "The disguised *abusive ad hominem* empirically investigated: Strategic manoeuvring with direct personal attacks." *Thinking & Reasoning*, vol 18, issue 3, 2012, pp 344-364. Doi: 10.1080/13546783.2012.678666.
3. Hinman, Lawrence M. "The case for *ad hominem* arguments." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol 60, issue 4, 1982, pp 338-345. Doi: 10.1080/00048408212340741.
4. Walton, D. N. "Argumentation Schemes and Historical Origins of the Circumstantial *Ad Hominem* Argument." *Argumentation*, vol 18, issue 3, Sept 2004, pp 359-368. Doi: 10.1023/B:ARGU.0000046706.45919.83.
5. Walton, Douglas. *Ad Hominem Arguments*. The University of Alabama Press, 1998. ISBN: 08 1 7309225.

Notes

There are more subcategories of ad hominem arguments but they either aren't as commonly used or toe the line on whether or not they truly count as an argument. Ad hominem arguments are generally treated as logical fallacies and while they are largely misused as such, it is important to note that bringing up an opponent's personal biases and character can be relevant to an argument. Stress to students the importance of really evaluating ad hominem arguments rather than taking them at their face value.